

## EDITORIAL COMMENT



### THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF NURSES

THIS number of the JOURNAL contains two addresses by notable medical men dealing with the professional status of nursing.

Perhaps no man in this country has had a broader acquaintance with nurses than Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, of Philadelphia.

The peculiar nature of his work required from its beginning the coöperation of intelligent, cultivated nurses, and perhaps we may safely say that no physician is more deeply indebted to nurses for his success than this greatest of our American neurologists. To those of our readers who do not know Dr. Mitchell personally and who have not been privileged to work with him some of his criticisms may seem harsh, but we know that what he has said in seeming condemnation of nurses and their work is said with but one motive, and that to rouse the nurses of his own city to a realizing sense of the defects in the methods of training which the most progressive women of the profession know to exist, not only in Philadelphia, but in every section of the country.

Those who are inclined to feel that Dr. Mitchell is unduly severe in his criticism should go over the paper a second time, when they will not fail to realize his deep appreciation of what is best in our profession.

He has for the nurse a high ideal, and he feels (this we knew personally) that the many failures to please are owing to defects in the past and present methods of training in the hospital.

Dr. Mitchell is deeply interested in the subject of preliminary training, and he believes, what we are all getting to believe, that the nurse, during some portion of her period of training, should give some time, if she has not done so before, to those studies which tend to give a broader intellectual culture. Dr. Mitchell's vast experience, covering the time since trained nursing first commenced in this country, gives him the right to speak with authority; but he shows a lack of familiarity with the effort which the nursing profession at large is making for its own advancement.

In this respect his paper differs from the address of Dr. Worcester, who, although a much younger man, has interested himself very greatly in New England in the subject of the training of nurses. Although we are not entirely in sympathy with all of Dr. Worcester's ideas, we recognize the fact that he has, more than any physician we have known, kept in touch with the effort that the nurses are making for their own professional advancement.

He is the first physician to assert that nursing cannot become an independent profession until it ceases to be dependent upon the medical profession for the most important part of the education of its members. Dr. Worcester sees the future, with its possibilities, and is ready to grant perfect liberty of action to nurses for the development and progress of their own profession. There is this comfort in the situation, both for ourselves and for the members of the medical profession, that the present status of the nursing profession, with its wonderful successes and its marvellous failures, is what medical men have made it.

When we have reached that point in our development which Dr. Worcester refers to, when not only the art but the science of nursing shall be taught nurses by nurses, we may claim all the glory, but we shall also bear alone the burden of criticism.

---

#### THE CASE OF JANE TOPPAN

MENTION was made in these pages some months ago of the arrest of the woman calling herself Jane Toppan, claiming to be a trained nurse, charged with having caused the death of twelve of her patients.

The explanation was given at that time that this woman had been discharged for cause from the Training-School of the Massachusetts General Hospital, and had been given employment by physicians in and about Boston, and had successfully posed before the public for a period of more than ten years as a trained nurse.

Previous to her trial this woman was examined by three of the most distinguished specialists for the insane in the State of Massachusetts. Her confessions have not been entirely made public, but if one is to believe what we hear of her own story, the horror increases, as she claims to have caused the death of thirty-one patients entrusted to her care. Her trial was very brief, the testimony of the three experts being accepted with no question by the jury, and she was pronounced insane and committed to the asylum at Taunton.

At the time of her arrest an attempt was made to inform the public through the daily press that Jane Toppan was not, in the accepted sense of the term, a trained nurse, but the public still fails to distinguish between a woman who has finished her education and been awarded a certificate and the woman who, having spent some months in a hospital, is discharged by that institution as having proven herself disqualified, either morally or physically, for the duties and responsibilities of a nurse.

There is nothing at all unusual in the circumstance of the discharge of Jane Toppan from the school, and the refusal on the part of medical men and the public to accept the decision of the institution as to her fitness for nursing work.

This thing is happening every day in every city where there is a training-school, and will continue to happen until nurses themselves demand some system of registration by the State which will make the posing of such a woman as a trained nurse a legal misdemeanor.

The Boston *Evening Transcript*, under date of July 5, publishes several letters of protest against the decision of the court.

One of these correspondents seems to somewhat question the decision pronounced by the three experts, calling attention to the fact that not one of the physicians who employed Jane Toppan seemed to have suspected or questioned her sanity. The circumstance which seems to us most remarkable is that the physicians who signed these thirty-one death certificates should not have recognized the real cause of death, but should have made a wrong diagnosis in so many instances.

This same correspondent suggests that it would be "well for each State to pass a law which shall require that all graduating nurses of both sexes must be subjected to some special test of their mental and moral fitness before being allowed to receive their diplomas."

This idea is in line with the movement for "State registration," but in view of the thirty-one erroneous death certificates it would seem not only necessary that nurses should be subjected to rigid examinations, but that the State examinations for physicians now existing are still lamentably faulty.

When the life of a citizen has been destroyed, the State leaves no stone unturned to punish the murderer, but it is one of the curious conditions of what we call civilization that the State exercises very little control for the preservation and protection of life.

Conditions are known to exist in public institutions, in factories, in tenement-houses, and in all places where people are congregated together that endanger life; unskilled and untrained employes are permitted to fill positions involving duties of such a nature that one false or careless action may endanger the lives of thousands of people; every kind of quackery in medicine and in nursing is tolerated; and yet it is only when some terrible accident occurs or some frightful fraud is exposed that the State concerns itself to punish the guilty party.

The sentencing of Jane Toppan to the Taunton Asylum for life will not prevent a disqualified woman, discharged from a reputable training-school for nurses, being taken up by one or more physicians, and in a short time becoming established as a regularly trained and graduated nurse.

We have made the statement before, and we cannot repeat it too often, that such abuses will continue so long as the members of the nursing profession permit them, and they will cease when the members of the nursing profession as a body demand legal protection for themselves and for the public at large.

---

#### IS THE PROFESSION OVERCROWDED?

ONE frequently hears the statement made that the nursing profession is becoming overcrowded, and in some of our large nursing centres, where nurses have congregated together in unreasonable numbers, one might think such to be the truth, but those women who were so fortunate as to listen to Miss Julia Lathrop's address of welcome to the members of the convention held in Chicago must have felt, as we did, that the nursing profession has only reached the border lands of the vast territory it has yet to enter.

Trained nursing for the insane is not a new problem in New York State or in Massachusetts, but it is a problem that the general nurse has not concerned herself about very largely. Gradually the interest is broadening, and eventually this field will take great numbers of our best women.

Miss Lathrop has shown that the State of Illinois is making very radical changes in its methods, and such improvements as she outlines must call for many women to occupy important executive positions.

As yet in those States where the training of nurses for the insane has been in operation for some years there has been little affiliation between the two classes of nurses, but we believe that a more cordial relationship is bound to follow when the importance of the better training for the insane is more universally recognized.

Another point which we wish to emphasize upon the subject of overcrowding, and which we have upon various occasions mentioned before, is the need of one or two trained nurses in every small town where there is a physician.

As a result of the overcrowding in large cities, and the consequent inability

on the part of many to earn more than a bare existence, this question of service to the country districts and the small cities will eventually take care of itself, but until the country districts, as well as the cities, are supplied with good nurses the profession cannot be said to be overcrowded. The amount of compensation in the towns is, of course, not as great as in the cities, but this is offset, on the other hand, by the more moderate cost of living, and we believe that a good nurse in a small community receives a certain kind of recognition as a valuable citizen which she loses in the overcrowding of our great cities.

We are told that in the work of "sanitary inspection" the demand for nurses specially trained for this class of work is vastly greater than the supply, and at every turn we find new openings for "trained nurses" (?), not always, however, of a strictly professional nature.

We have recently seen an advertising circular of a large rubber-goods establishment which offers as one of its attractions the services of a "trained nurse," whose duties shall consist in trying on and adjusting various articles and appliances, and we have recently seen a newspaper article commending a sort of intelligence-office arrangement for the bringing together of patrons and "trained nurses," the latter to serve in the capacity of ladies' maids, with the comment that the nurses' training made such women specially valuable as travelling-companions. With all of our reaching out towards higher ideals, there is a certain comfort in knowing that the woman who is without professional pride soon finds her level in some other line of occupation, and in a very short time the uniform, which she persists in wearing, is all that is left to remind one that she claims kinship with us.

---

THE General Federation of Women's Clubs, lately in session in California, gave a great deal of attention to the subject of child labor, which is becoming a horrible and shameful feature of our strong and wealthy civilization. The new industrial revival in the Southern States is based upon child labor; children from six to twelve years work for fourteen hours a day in the factories for a pittance.

The worst part of it is that these factories are almost entirely owned and controlled by capitalists from the Northern States, who in their own States would find laws forbidding such heartless enslaving of childhood. Yet in New Jersey a shocking state of abuse of childhood in the glass factories has lately come to the public notice, and Illinois is notorious for its oppression of children.

Mrs. Granger, president of the Georgia Federation, made an address on the subject which affected the audience to tears, in which she described the vain efforts made by the club women of the South to secure legislation to prevent the employment of children under twelve in the factories. Miss Jane Addams spoke most strongly and movingly on the subject, and the federation voted that for the next twenty years its efforts shall be devoted to the initiation, maintenance, and improvement of child labor laws.

---

#### THE NEW YORK MEETING

THE meeting of the New York State Nurses' Association at Utica was as well attended as could be expected in midsummer. The nurses of Utica who are not yet members came in commendable number and showed great interest in the discussions.

The whole tone of the meeting was harmonious and pleasant. This years of experience have accustomed us to think the prevailing characteristic of nurses' assemblies.

The discussions were in the form of informal conference rather than of argument, and definite business motions and voting were only such as were needed to carry on the work continuously until the next meeting, when a much larger attendance is expected. The most satisfactory point of the committees' reports was the announcement by the Legislative Committee that Senator Armstrong would undertake to carry our bill to the Legislature. This, with the support we shall undoubtedly receive from the medical profession and the public, is almost enough to insure its success at an early date.

The necessity, placed before us by advice from the Regents, of selecting a title by which the trained nurse should be distinguished from the untaught woman took the assembly somewhat by surprise, and as this is an extremely important action it was voted that the direct vote of each member should be taken before the next meeting. The choice of titles as suggested lies between "registered nurse," "registered graduate nurse," "graduate nurse," "trained nurse," and "certified nurse." To us it would seem that of these titles, R. N. (registered nurse) would be, on the whole, the most descriptive, the most definite, and also the most dignified. The word "trained" we long ago discovered can never mean anything definite, "graduate" is no more expressive, and "certified" does not so immediately explain itself as the word "registered."

We now once more remind nurses of the duty they owe the public and to their profession in supporting this movement. Every nurse who is a graduate of a general hospital training-school, or from a New York State hospital for the insane, if not a member, should be a member of the State Association.

---

ONE of the pioneer medical women of America died lately in Massachusetts, Dr. Marie Zakrzewska, who was born in Poland, studied medicine in the "forties" in this country, and who was the founder of the New England Hospital for Women and Children. Dr. Zakrzewska was also associated with Drs. Emily and Elizabeth Blackwell in establishing the New York Infirmary for Women and Children.

